Meta buried evidence of social media harm: US court filings

META shut down internal research into the mental health effects of Facebook and Instagram after finding causal evidence that its products harmed users mental health, according to unredacted filings in a class action by US school districts against Meta and other social media platforms.

In a 2020 research project code-named Project Mercury, Meta scientists worked with survey firm Nielsen to gauge the effect of deactivating Facebook and Instagram, according to Meta documents obtained via discovery.

To the company's disappointment, people who stopped using Facebook for a week reported lower feelings of depression, anxiety, loneliness and social comparison, internal documents said. Rather than publishing those findings or pursuing additional research, the filing states, Meta called off further work and internally declared that the negative study findings were tainted by the existing media narrative around the company.

Privately, however, staff assured Nick Clegg, Meta's then-head of global public policy, that the conclusions of the research were valid.

The Nielsen study does show causal impact on social comparison, (unhappy face emoji), an unnamed staff researcher allegedly wrote. Another staffer worried that keeping quiet about negative findings would be akin to the tobacco industry doing research and knowing cigs were bad and then keeping that info to themselves.

Despite Meta's own work documenting a causal link between its products and negative mental health effects, the filing alleges, Meta told Congress that it had no ability to quantify whether its products were harmful to teenage girls.

Flawed methodology

In a statement, Meta spokesman Andy Stone said the study was stopped because its methodology was flawed and that it worked diligently to improve the safety of its products. "The full record will show that for over a decade, we have listened to parents, researched issues that matter most, and made real changes to protect teens," he said.

The allegation of Meta burying evidence of social media harms is just one of many in a late Friday filing by Motley Rice, a law firm suing Meta, Google, TikTok and Snapchat on behalf of school districts around the country. Broadly, the plaintiffs argue the companies have intentionally hidden the internally recognised risks of their products from users, parents and teachers.

TikTok, Google and Snapchat did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

A hearing regarding the filing is set for Jan 26 in northern California district court. —Reuters

Lebanon asks world to stop Israeli attacks

Deadly strike in Beirut kills five; Israel claims Hezbollah chief of staff targeted

LEBANESE civil defence members gather near a building, destroyed by an Israeli air strike.—Reuters

BEIRUT: Lebanese President Joseph Aoun issued an urgent plea for the international community to "intervene firmly" and stop the relentless aggression against his country after a deadly Israeli airstrike on a densely populated southern suburb of Beirut on Sunday killed at least five people and wounded 28.

In a statement following the devastating attack on a residential building, President Aoun said Lebanon "reiterates its call to the international community to assume its responsibility and intervene firmly and seriously to stop the attacks on Lebanon and its people".

Lebanon's health ministry confirmed the human cost of the strike, announcing a "final toll" of five people killed and 28 wounded. The ministry did not release the identities of the civilians killed in the attack.

However, Israel quickly took responsibility for the attack, claiming that the Hezbollah's chief of staff was targeted.

Later, Netanyahu's office confirmed he had ordered the attack — the latest in a series of violations against Lebanese sovereignty despite a year-long ceasefire. "In the heart of Beirut, the IDF [Israeli military] attacked the Hezbollah chief of staff and Israel is determined to act to achieve its objectives everywhere and at all times." the premier's office said in a statement.

Hezbollah confirmed a senior commander was targeted in the strike. Lebanon's official National News Agency said three missiles were fired at the building. The strike devastated the Haret Hreik area in Beirut's southern suburbs, a densely populated neighbourhood.

An AFP correspondent at the scene witnessed the attack's aftermath, which tore through the third and fourth floors of a nine-story apartment building. Debris littered the road below, and a car was heavily damaged in the street.

Rescue workers were seen inside the dust-filled apartments searching for survivors as ambulances and fire crews scrambled to the scene.

Sunday's strike was the first on Beirut's southern suburbs since June 5.—Agencies

JOHANNESBURG: A general view of the plenary on the second day of the G20 Leaders' Summit at the Nasrec Expo Centre.—AFP

South Africa terms G20 summit 'win for multilateralism'

Despite US objections, declaration addresses climate crisis, debt relief and clean energy

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa said on Sunday that the declaration from this weekend's Group of 20 summit reflected a "renewed commitment to multilateral cooperation", concluding a meeting that pitted him against his US counterpart.

Ramaphosa, host of the Johannesburg summit, pushed through the declaration addressing challenges like the climate crisis despite objections from the United States, which boycotted the event.

Addressing the closing ceremony, Ramaphosa said the declaration showed world leaders' "shared goals outweigh our differences".

US President Trump boycotted the Nov 22-23 summit on the grounds of allegations, which have been comprehensively falsified, that the host country's Black majority government persecutes its white minority.

Trump had also rejected South Africa's agenda of helping developing nations transition to clean energy, cut their crippling debt costs and adapt to climate change-induced weather disasters.

But Ramaphosa secured consensus from the leaders present, aside from Argentina, which did not object to a declaration being made without it.

It was the first G20 summit in Africa and the joint declaration used the kind of language long disliked by the US administration.

The document stressed the seriousness of climate change and the need for adaptation, praised ambitious renewable energy targets and decried hefty debt service charges suffered by poor countries.

The summit came as tensions over Russia's war in Ukraine fracture the transatlantic alliance, and after unavailing climate talks at COP30 in Brazil, in which oil-producing and high-consuming nations prevented mention of fossil fuels driving the crisis going in the final declaration.

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said on Sunday that both the G20 and COP30 summits showed multilateralism was very much alive.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said the US was mentioned only in passing at the G20 summit and that it played only a minor role as new connections are being forged and the world reorganises itself. "It wasn't a good decision for the American government to be absent. But that's something the American government has to decide for itself," he said.

"We are not experiencing a transition, but a rupture," acknowledged Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney before the session.—Agencies

Two courts jostle for space

Continued from Page 1

Justice Rozi Khan Barrech and Justice Syed Arshad Hussain Shah were also conducted in the same congested room.

The IHC administration arranged seven courtrooms to enable the FCC to function temporarily until its permanent premises were finalised. But once senior staff of the FCC — many of them brought in from the Supreme Court — assumed their roles, the shortage of space became even more pronounced.

The allocation of courtrooms also caused unease. The FCC chief justice was assigned Courtroom No. 2, previously used by Justice Mohsin Akhtar Kayani for his own judicial work.

Senior officials within the high court expressed the apprehension that since the FCC is the highest constitutional forum, its chief justice could potentially assume control of the IHC building if he so desired.

Bar divided

At Friday's press conference, IHCBA President Wajid Ali Gilani emphasised that the FCC's use of IHC premises must remain temporary.

"The FCC must first be moved to the Supreme Court building, and permanently to the FSC, where the caseload is lower and infrastructure already exists," he said. "No institution will be allowed to impose itself on the site of the high court."

"Any administrative decision taken without consultation with the legal community is unacceptable and will be vigorously resisted," he warned.

Mr Gilani recalled that Islamabad's judicial framework had evolved from a single court functioning in Melody Market in 1960, to a full-fledged system with more than a hundred judges.

He said buildings constructed through public funds must operate according to constitutional norms rather than administrative convenience.

IHCBA Secretary Manzoor Ahmed Jajja said rumours of the IHC's relocation stemmed from a private TV report with "no legal or administrative standing". He warned: "If anyone tries to wall off the High Court, there will be a strong protest. This community will not allow the judiciary's independence to be compromised." In stark contrast to the high court bar's position, the Islamabad Bar Association (IBA) — commonly known as the District Bar — welcomed the proposal to shift the high court back to its old premises in Sector G-10.

After a cabinet meeting on Friday, IBA President Chaudhry Naeem Ali Gujjar said the proposal would alleviate difficulties faced by lawyers and litigants. "Shifting the high court back to G-10 is a practical and long-awaited step. It will facilitate the legal community and improve access to justice," he said.

Thousands of Australians without power after cyclone hits

SYDNEY: Thousands of people in Australia's Northern Territory were without power on Sunday after a tropical cyclone brought destructive winds to the region, including capital Darwin, overnight.

Fina, a category three cyclone, was on Sunday clocking wind gusts of up to 205 kph (127 mph) as it moved away from Darwin after passing the city late on Saturday as a "severe tropical cyclone", the nation's Bureau of Meteorology said.

For residents of Darwin, population of around 140,000, Fina conjured painful memories of Cyclone Tracy, which wiped out much of the city on Christmas Day 1974, killing 66 people, in what was one of Australia's worst natural disasters.

Chief Minister Lia Finocchiaro said about 19,000 people had lost power due to Fina, which had also caused property damage and submerged roads, but resulted in no injuries to residents.

"This cyclone saw a territory that was united and prepared for what was to come," Finocchiaro said in a media conference televised from Darwin.

Authorities urged residents of Darwin, a northern garrison city, to stay clear of downed power lines, as crews started damage assessments.

Darwin International Airport, which closed on Saturday as a precaution over Fina, said on Sunday it was "working to re-establish operations as soon as it is safe to do so".

Category three tropical cyclones, two levels below the highest danger rating, typically damage structures, crops and trees and cause power failures, according to the weather bureau.

In March, ex-tropical cyclone Alfred hit neighbouring Queensland, closing schools and leaving hundreds of thousands of people without power.—Reuters

Dhaka again asks India for Hasina's extradition

DHAKA: Bangladesh's government said on Sunday it had asked India to extradite ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina, who was sentenced earlier this week to be hanged over a deadly crackdown against a student-led uprising.

Hasina, 78, has been in hiding in India since her autocratic rule was overthrown in August 2024. As prime minister, she had had New Delhi's backing.

Touhid Hossain, who holds the foreign affairs portfolio in Bangladesh's interim administration, told reporters, "We sent a letter seeking the extradition of Sheikh Hasina."

He did not elaborate on the contents of the letter, which according to Bengali newspaper *Prothom Alo* was the third official extradition request since Hasina fled.

Following the court ruling on Monday, convicting Hasina of crimes against humanity and sentencing her to death, the foreign ministry in Dhaka said in a statement that Delhi had an "obligatory responsibility" under a bilateral treaty to facilitate the former leader's return.

India's foreign ministry said in response it had "noted" the verdict, without directly commenting on the extradition request.

It did not immediately respond to the latest letter from Dhaka.

Bangladesh has been in political turmoil since the end of Hasina's rule, and violence has marred campaigning for elections expected in February 2026.

The United Nations says up to 1,400 people were killed in crackdowns as Hasina tried to cling to power, deaths that were central to her trial.

India's past support for Hasina has frayed relations between the two neighbours since her overthrow.

But tensions appear to have eased slightly when Bangladesh's National Security Adviser Khalilur Rahman visited India this week for a regional security summit and met his counterpart Ajit Doval. Media reports in Bangladesh said Rahman invited Doval for a visit. —AFP

50 children in Nigeria escape kidnapping; 38 worshippers rescued

LAGOS: At least 50 of the more than 300 children snatched by gunmen from a Catholic school in Nigeria have escaped their captors, a Christian group said on Sunday, as the president announced the rescue of 38 worshippers seized in a separate attack last week.

Gunmen on Friday raided St Mary's co-education school in Niger state, taking 303 children and 12 teachers in one of the largest mass kidnappings in Nigeria.

The abduction came days after gunmen stormed a secondary school in neighbouring Kebbi state, taking 25 girls on Monday.

On Tuesday, gunmen raided a church in Kwara state in an attack that was recorded and broadcast online, showing the service being interrupted by gunfire, worshippers fleeing and screaming being heard outside.

Two people were killed in that attack, but the 38 worshippers who were abducted were later rescued by security forces, President Bola Tinubu said Sunday on his X account.

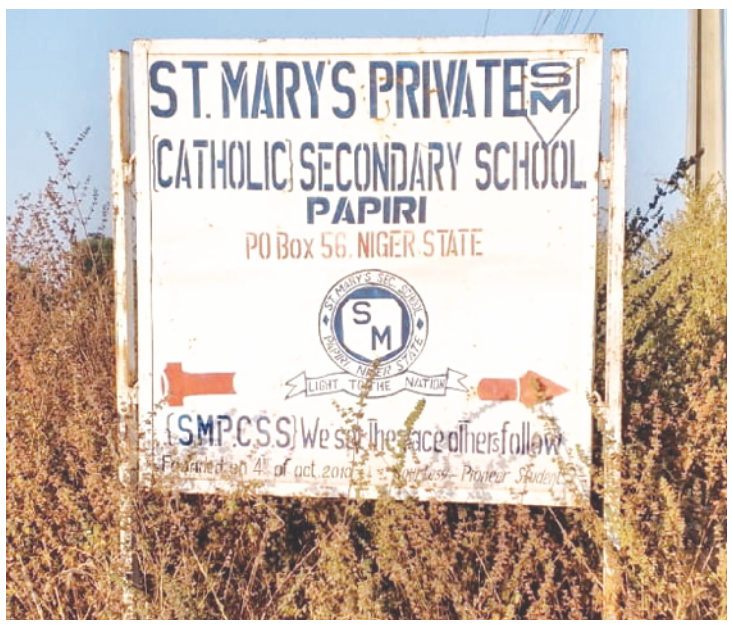
Separately, the Christian Association of Nigeria said in a statement that "we have received some good news as fifty (St Mary's) pupils escaped and have reunited with their parents." The number of boys and girls - aged between eight and 18 years - kidnapped from St Mary's is almost half of the school's student population of over 600.

The Nigerian government has not commented on the number of children taken from the school, but Tinubu said in his X posting that "51 out of the missing" Catholic school students "have been recovered".

"I will not relent," he vowed "and under my watch, we will secure this nation and protect our people".

Mounting security fears in Africa's most populous nation have sparked a wave of school closures across some parts of the country.

Since Islamist militants kidnapped nearly 300 schoolgirls from Chibok town more than a decade ago, Nigeria has struggled with a spate of mass kidnappings, mostly carried out by criminal gangs looking for ransom payments.



PAPIRI (Nigeria): A sign directing people to St. Mary's School, which was the site of the kidnapping of more than 300 children and staff a couple of days ago.—Reuters

Armed gangs often attack remote boarding schools where they know a lack of security presence will make for soft targets. Most victims are released after negotiations.

Pope Leo XIV on Sunday made "a heartfelt appeal for the immediate release of the hostages".

He expressed his "deep sorrow, especially for the many young boys and girls kidnapped and for their anguished families," at the end of the Angelus prayer.

The two abduction operations and the church attack came as US President Donald Trump threatened military action over what he called the persecution of Christians by radical Islamists in Nigeria.

When asked about the recent attacks and kidnappings on Fox News Radio, Trump said "what's happening in Nigeria is a disgrace".

Nearly a week after their capture, two dozen school girls in neighbouring Kebbi state are still missing.

Security forces have identified locations where they are thought to be held, according to a security source. Only one of the 25 girls managed to escape early in the week.

Meanwhile, 13 women and girls aged between 16 and 23 were kidnapped in Nigeria's northeastern Borno state while walking home from their farms on Saturday, a local official told AFP. One was later freed after she said she was married.

"They are all Muslim," said Abubakar Mazhinyi, chairman of the Askira-Uba district, adding the area where they were taken from is 20 kilometres from Sambisa forest, a game reserve turned jihadist enclave in Borno state.

Beyond the kidnapping gangs, Nigeria is also dealing with a deadly Islamist insurgency in the northeast of the country, where the violence has killed more than 40,000 people and displaced around two million since it erupted in 2019.

Aisha Yesufu, co-founder of the #BringBackOurGirls group movement which led the campaign for the release of the Chibok schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram 11 years ago, said kidnappings continues because "authorities are doing nothing" to curb the crisis.—AFP